



Rev. George A. Dickson

“How Old Are You?”
Or
“The Sudden Sixties”

A sermon preached by Rev. George
A. Dickson at Knox United Church,
Calgary, Alberta, November 24, 1929.

DEDICATION

To the older members of my congregation whose loyal support and understanding sympathy have been a source of strength and inspiration to me, I dedicate this simple message.

The printing of this sermon is made possible through the generosity of one or two men in the congregation.

My thanks are due Miss Georgina Thomson, M.A., who assisted me in the revision of this sermon.

"HOW OLD ARE YOU?" or "THE SUDDEN SIXTIES."

Text: Prov. 20, v. 29: "The glory of young men is their strength, and the beauty of old men is the grey head."

In other lands and other times, old age has been accorded its due meed of respect. In China, as we know, reverence for the old has been elevated into the cult of ancestor worship. In ancient Rome, the very derivation of the word "senate" from "sen," meaning old, shows that the government was entrusted only to the mature in age. But here and now we find youth very much to the fore and demanding the centre of the stage. We hear it said that this is a young man's country. We sometimes see older men pushed aside to make way for those younger in years. Even in the ministry I have recently seen two examples of this. A congregation whose pulpit fell vacant, stipulated that the new man should be young, while in another case where the vacancy had been filled, the first reaction of the people to the man chosen was one of criticism—he was too old.

The amusements of young people also come in for a great deal of attention one way and another, although the older people, too, "step out" at times. Not long ago I saw a cartoon in Punch which showed a young man and his sister waiting disconsolately on the doorstep in the small hours of the morning. A sympathetic policeman asks them if they have lost their key, and they reply, "No, Grannie has it and she hasn't got home from her night club yet."

But for the most part it is youth, and the interests of youth, that monopolize the stage, the press and the pulpit. For example, I myself have made it a practice to preach a special sermon once a month to young people, whereas this is the first time I have done the same for the older members of my congregation. Small wonder, then, that old people sometimes feel themselves neglected and unnecessary. I hope that when I have finished this little talk this morning that any feeling you may

have had of being on the shelf will have entirely disappeared, and that you will realize that age has many advantages denied to youth.

I have taken my title from a story of Edna Ferber's, entitled "The Sudden Sixties," in which the heroine was suddenly brought to a realization of the fact that she was sixty by seeing an anxious, elderly woman hurrying toward her, and not recognizing this woman as herself until she bumped into the mirror she had been approaching all the while, and raised a black and blue lump on her forehead. Then she stood with her hat slightly askew staring at this woman who was herself. Just yesterday, or the day before at most, she had been a bride of twenty in a wine-colored silk wedding gown very stiff and rich. Now, here she was all of a sudden sixty.

That is the way with all of us. We are so busy falling in love, making a home, raising our children, earning a living, working, planning, hoping, that before we know it the years have flown, and we wake up some morning to find ourselves old.

It is to such that I would speak a word of encouragement to-day. Age may have its drawbacks, its rheumatism, its dependence on spectacles and trusty walking stick, but it has advantages and privileges too. What are they?

FIRST, I SHOULD LIKE TO EMPHASIZE THE BEAUTY OF OLD AGE; FOR OLD AGE HAS A BEAUTY OF ITS OWN. Like old lace, old wine and old china, it acquires a certain mellowness and richness with the years. Some misguided people when they have their picture taken, ask the photographer to take out all the wrinkles, with the result that the picture appears insipid and meaningless. Wrinkles and lines on a face are the character marks that the years have painted there, and they give that face interest and meaning. That is why so many of the world's masterpieces in art have been pictures of old men and women. Think of Rembrandt's portraits, Vermeer's old women, Whistler's "Mother," and a host of others.

ALICE L. HARRIS, author of "The Sudden Sixties."

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There is something about white hair, too, that has a special beauty and appeal. As our text says: "The glory of old men is the grey head." (It doesn't speak of the bald head, but it, too, should have its honorable mention.) As for bobbed hair, the other day someone asked a little boy where his grannie was, and he said, "Oh, she's down at the barber shop having a neck trim." I must confess I am old fashioned enough to like Grannie best with her silver locks uncut, and forming a soft frame for her gentle face. An Irish poet, Joseph Campbell, has given us this picture of an old woman:

THE OLD WOMAN

"As a white candle
In a holy place,
So is the beauty
Of an aged face.

"As the spent radiance
Of the winter sun,
So is a woman
With her travail done.

"Her brood gone from her
And her thoughts as still
As the waters
Under a ruined mill."

There is a beauty about such a face that quite surpasses the beauty of youth. And I like to think, too, of the fine, rugged heads of old men. There is an old man who sweeps the streets near here, whose face with its beard reminds me of my father's. I like to bring him in and give him a cup of tea and watch his twinkling eyes as he talks.

I think, too, that when we speak of the beauty of age, most of us will think not only of our own loved ones, but of one who belonged to all of us, and who left us a few short months ago. The snowy crown and seer-like eyes of Dr. Shearer were symbols of the beautiful, brave spirit of the man and an inspiration to all of us as he passed in and out among us.

NOT ONLY HAS OLD AGE ITS CROWN OF BEAUTY, BUT IT HAS ALSO ITS CROWN OF WISDOM. If the

years bring nothing else in the way of riches, they bring a wealth of experience that enables men and women to regard life with a certain perspective that one cannot acquire while in the midst of the struggle. I once heard an old minister say, "Deliver me from the man who wishes he were a boy again," and I think it was this ripeness of experience that he was thinking of as contrasted with the callowness and unformed ideas of youth.

A few years ago, Susan Ertz published a novel called "Madame Claire," the heroine of which was an old lady of eighty. In this novel, Madame Claire, writing to a friend of her girlhood, asks, "Stephen, would you be young again? For myself, the answer is no, no, no! And I have lived. There is nothing to be feared, have been happy, too, and with reason. Not for anything would I be blind again, uncertain, groping; feeling my way, wondering where my duty lay, dreading the blows of fate before they struck, valuing happiness too highly. That is life. Now the turmoil has died down, confusion is no more. **IT'S LIKE SITTING ON A QUIET HILL-TOP IN THE LIGHT OF THE SETTING SUN.** Fate cannot harm me—I and there is nothing to be expected except the kindly hand of death, and the opening of another door. Perhaps one is a little tired, but the climb, after all, was worth it, **AND ONE CAN THINK HERE,** and listen to the cries of the birds, and the sound of the wind in the grass. The lie of the land over which one has come takes on a different aspect and falls into a pattern. Those woods where one felt so lost—how little they were, and how many openings they had, if one had only gone forward, instead of rushing in blind circles I take as much pride in being eighty as I once took in being sixteen. After all, being an old woman is my role at present, and, naturally, it is a role I wish to play well. . . . And that tantalizing veil that shuts us off from the beyond should be wearing thin at our age, so that by watching and waiting one should be able to catch glimpses of what it hides."

Yes, age brings a serenity and peace that is sweet after the strife and passion of youth and the prime of life. Hartley Coleridge, in his poem, "Youth, Thou Art Fled," after lamenting the departure of that happy time with its mirth and joy, concludes:

"Yet could a wish, a thought,
Unravel all the complex web of age,—
Could all the characters that Time hath
wrought
Be clean effaced from my memorial page
By one short word, the word I would not
say;—
I thank my God because my hairs are
gray."

Thrice happy the man or woman who shares this hill-top view with a dear partner who has travelled all the way with him, and shared the work and the joys of the years. This dear comradeship has been expressed perhaps more tenderly by Burns than by any other poet in his little song:

JOHN ANDERSON, MY JO.

"John Anderson, my jo, John,
When we were first acquaint,
Your locks were like the raven,
Your bonnie brow was brent;
But now your brow is beld, John,
Your locks are like the snow;
But blessings on your frosty pow,
John Anderson, my jo,

"John Anderson, my jo, John,
We clamb the hill thegither;
And mony a canty day, John,
We've had wi' ane anither.
Now we maun tatter down, John,
And hand in hand we'll go
And sleep thegither at the foot,
John Anderson, my jo."

Those who have lost this dear partner have the sweetness of memories for "God has given us our memories that we may have roses in December."

NOT ONLY DO THE YEARS
BRING BEAUTY AND WISDOM, BUT
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THEY BRING AN INFLUENCE OVER
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HARDLY BE ESTIMATED.

We know when we go to older people with our griefs, or our problems, that they will understand because they have been through it all themselves. James Oppenheim has expressed this thought beautifully in his poem called "Grandmother." He says of her:

"She has known life, she has known earliest dreams,
Of wandering childhood, earliest girlhood dreams,
Earliest womanly love: the passion of the mother:
The burden of the maker of the home:
The pangs of birth; the quicksand clutch of death.
Wife, woman, toiler, mother, guardian, nurse,
O, lowly angel of three generations!
She has gone through it all; all dreams we know,
All pangs we seek to tear from our torn hearts.
All joys that thrill us, all wild hours of grief,
All folly, wisdom, all that makes up life,
Has she gone through—gone through unknown to fame,
Unhonored, unapplauded, meek and pure,
And lo, now she emerges, from the fight
The smoke and thunder and the noise of life,
Radiant, mellowed, and the golden days
Are hers; the golden autumn days are hers!
Unvexed by brawling problems of the hour,
Her very glance solves all: she brings to us
A sweet solution of the life on earth,
Yea, tender touches of eternal God,
Not preached in words, but raining from her soul
As autumn haze in the golden Indian summer
Fills through the woodlands and the world is lost."

Ramsay MacDonald tells us that his grannie laid the foundations for his later achievements in the legends and folk-tales with which she stored his young mind; and many less distinguished people can look back with happy memories to good times with grannie or grandfather. Some grandparents may feel that their gifts are very ordinary. They are like the old lady of whom Eugene Field wrote so amazingly and yet lovingly:

"I pray that risen from the dead,
I may in glory stand,
A crown perhaps upon my head,
But a needle in my hand.

"I've never learned to sing or play.
So let no harp be mine;
From birth unto my dying day
Plain sewing's been my line.

"Therefore, accustomed to the end
To plying useful stitches,
I'll be content if asked to mend
The little angels' breeches."

Surely there are many grandmothers whose special line is plain sewing. The dolls you dress, the toys you mend, as well as the stories you tell may all seem little things, but the memory of these services of love will remain with the children when they are grown men and women and have children of their own. There may be no conscious nor deliberate instruction in what you say and do, but the influence will perhaps be all the greater for that very reason.

Lady Watts, in her biography of her husband, G. F. Watts, the famous painter, tells of an incident which shows the unconscious influence of an old man on a younger. Watts had been painting a portrait of a rich merchant, and one night he accepted an invitation to dine at his home. When the time came to go home, to Watt's surprise, the young son of the house whom he knew to be living a very dissolute life, got up and offered to walk across the park with him. Years afterwards, when the two met again, the youth had distinguish-

ed himself at university and grown into a noble man. He confided to Watts that he dated the whole change in his life from the night when they had walked together across the park. When some one asked Watts what they had talked about, he replied gravely and simply: "We talked about the stars." There was no moralizing here, but the influence of that noble old man had had more effect than any amount of preaching or seckling.

And to the old people in my congregation I would like to pay my own tribute to-day. You will never know what your presence here Sunday after Sunday has meant to me, and the little chats I have been privileged to have with you in your homes. There are times when a minister wonders if his work is worth while, when criticisms and indifference and the sense of failure wrap him round like a black fog. At such times the words of loyalty and encouragement that have come from the older members of my congregation have cheered my soul and enabled me to take up again with courage and faith the burden that seemed so heavy before. Older people are sometimes accused of being set and narrow in their views, but I have not found it so in my congregation. On one occasion, when I had preached a sermon that made me feel a little nervous because of its radical viewpoint, a lady over seventy came up to me and congratulated me on what she called a "statesmanlike" sermon. On a similar occasion a man who has passed the mark of his three-score years and ten, said to me, "Man, this is what we have been waiting for for years." My trouble is not in being obliged to put the soft pedal on, but in keeping abreast of the keen and alert minds among the older as well as the younger people in Knox. So let me thank you for your stimulating interest and your kindly and helpful presence here Sunday after Sunday, and the knowledge that your prayers and sympathy are going out to me. You can never know fully what it has meant to me in my ministry here.

IN CONCLUSION, I WANT YOU TO REALIZE THIS MORNING THAT

OLD AGE IS THE CROWN AND GLORY OF LIFE. As one man said when he reached the age of ninety, "The sugar is all in the bottom of the cup." There are lonely times in old age when your friends drop off one by one and you feel "like one who treads alone some banquet hall deserted," but there are many compensations as we have seen. You have time now to do things that you never had time for in the busy years of young manhood and young womanhood. The scientist, Huxley, started to learn Greek at the age of eighty. Thomas Hardy published a play when he was over eighty and a book of poems of real merit. Our friend, George Bernard Shaw, who is over seventy, is not only producing the finest of plays still, but last year published his "Intelligent Woman's Guide to Socialism and Capitalism," that may revolutionize popular ideas of economics. Don't feel that your work is ended, but rather that you are being offered new opportunities of usefulness and service. Mr Edward Tuck, a banker who is 85 years old, wrote the following lines which sum up what I am trying to say:

WHAT IS AGE?

"Age is a quality of mind
If you've left your dreams behind,
If hope is cold,
If you no longer look ahead,
If your ambition's fires are dead,
Then you are old.

"But—if from life you take the best,
If in life you keep the zest,
If love you hold,
No matter how the years go by,
No matter how the birthdays fly,
You are not old!"

And then we think of Browning with his splendid war cry of old age:

"Grow old along with me,
The best is yet to be,
The last of life for which the first was
made—
Our times are in His hand
Who saith a whole I planned.
Youth shows but half, trust God, see all,
Nor be afraid!"

May we all grow old with this thought—that the best is yet to be. Remember, my dear old friends, that you are not only loved, but you are needed. You have a place that no one else can fill in God's work and plan. May your last years be bright with a sunset glow and filled with the peace that passeth all understanding. And remember though—

"The grey head is bendin'
And the auld shune's needin' mendin',
And the trav'lin's near its endin',
The end's aye the best!"

